Why the Resistance to Workplace Diversity Training?
by Pamela Fay

Diversity happens--even in companies that draw from relatively homogeneous employee pools. In addition to sex and race, diversity also refers to religion, sexual preference, age, class, even schools attended. Diversity training is intended to help individuals overcome personal biases and work better with others. There are many barriers, however, that can interfere with the implementation of training and its effectiveness. Companies that recognize the barriers and address them are the successful companies into the next decade.

History of Diversity Training
Early diversity training focused on workforce changes during the 1980s. This included large numbers of women and minorities entering positions that were traditionally the bastions of white males. More recently, the definition of diversity training has expanded to include all dimensions of human difference. The most progressive companies no longer focus diversity training efforts on awareness of biases. Now, the emphasis is on the skills needed to work effectively across groups that are more dissimilar than ever. These skills extend beyond mere diversity to the creation of inclusive environments.

Management Commitment is Mandatory
Management may not understand the need for diversity training. The company may have few, if any, minority employees. And even if it does, most educated people do not consider themselves to have biases. Some implement training programs only to avoid potential lawsuits. However, diversity training, if not executed properly, can agitate existing prejudices and reinforce deeply-seated biases. Moreover, absent top-down commitment to diversity, mandatory training has little chance for success. Management commitment is demonstrated by putting in place diversity programs that emphasize, for example, communication strategies, recruiting and mentoring, in addition to training. Management must herald the benefits of diversity, not just for the diverse few, but for the entire company.

How Companies Overcome the Barriers
Diversity training is most effective when both management and employees are vested in a more holistic diversity program. The diversity program is considered holistic when it is embedded in, rather than apart from, the company's strategic plan. As one element of the diversity program, training must be tied to company goals and objectives. In other words, the successful execution of the strategic plan is, in part, dependent on the ability of diverse groups to interact successfully. If the company is serving clients in global markets, as just one example, the diversity plan should reflect these goals. Your company needn't be philanthropic in order to include goals that unite people and communities and embrace some level of corporate responsibility so that when your employees buy-in to the overall management strategy, it is, necessarily linked to achieving diversity goals.

Additionally, diversity training must be well executed. To further ensure buy-in, both minority *and* majority groups should be included in the planning and the implementation

of the diversity program. This includes clear communication of training objectives, establishing of reinforcing mechanisms, and metrics to gage effectiveness.

Address Molehills, not Mountains
Assume that barriers exist prior to starting the first training session. At this point, the barriers are molehills, not mountains. Address these barriers with pre-training communications. Too often, communication focuses on "fixing people." This is how bias awareness messaging is perceived. Instead, focus communications on readying business units to *execute strategies* within and across diverse groups. Communications should cascade from senior levels of management to every layer. Stem resistance with well-prepared managers who can field questions and align the training with the organizational goals.

Next Steps
Diversity training is an ongoing process. After the first session, use the evaluations to tweak the program and plan the next phase. The skills that promote effective work habits within diverse groups are the same skills that build effective leaders and sustainable organizations. The process isn't an easy one, but it is well worthwhile.